

## HEPATITIS C TESTING: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS FOR YOUR CLIENT

1. What kind of diseases do we screen for? Is Hepatitis C one of those?  
Screening is best for diseases with no symptoms, which have an accurate test, a long opportunity to intervene, and good treatment. Yes.
2. Who do we screen for Hepatitis C?
  - Past injected illicit drugs,
  - Unexplained abnormal ALT,
  - Blood products before 1992
  - Hemodialysis, HIV, HCV sexual partners, children of HCV mothers are also on the list.} account for 85% of Hepatitis C patients found by screening
3. What is an Anti-Hepatitis C antibody?
  - Anti-HCV antibody means the body's immune system has seen the HCV virus in the past. It is an ELISA (enzyme linked immunoabsorbent assay) test.
4. What difference does it make to find someone who doesn't know he or she has Hepatitis C?
  - Decrease rate of liver scarring by stopping alcohol (2-4x less scar) and marijuana.
  - Eradicate the virus 40-80% of the time with PEG interferon and ribavirin
  - Immunize against Hepatitis A and B, perhaps preventing liver failure if later infected
  - Avoid transmission by not sharing needles, intranasal straws, razors or toothbrushes
  - Recognize peri-natal transmission to infants (<10%)
  - Reassure about low risk of sexual transmission
  - Avoid blood, tissue, or organ donation
5. Why do we do a confirmatory test on a positive HCV antibody before treatment? What's a RIBA test?  
Anti-HCV antibody means the immune system remembers HCV, but doesn't mean the virus is still there. All blood tests have some false positives. In healthy, low-risk people like blood donors, anti-HCV antibody positives are 40% false positives. A RIBA (antibody test using recombinant immunoblot format assay) doesn't find more positives, but it's negative in false positives. It is used only for HCV antibody positive people who are low risk for actually having HCV, like blood donors.
6. What is the best test for the presence of the virus in the body? What's a quantitative HCV RNA by PCR?  
Quantitative HCV RNA by PCR measurement tells us the number of living viral units present in blood. The measurement is done by extracting the nucleic acid, reverse transcription of it, and amplifying the nucleic acid to a degree that it can be measured. This is the best test for people who are being screened for Hepatitis C because they are much more likely to have HCV than blood donors. The amount of virus gives an idea of the odds of successful treatment, and serves as a baseline number to follow during treatment. Test results are not comparable from different labs. Qualitative HCV RNA by PCR is less useful because it gives only a yes or no as to presence of the virus.
7. Why check for other liver diseases before treating Hepatitis C with PEG interferon and ribavirin?  
Some other liver diseases may need treatment first (autoimmune hepatitis or hemochromatosis). Chance of cure better if alcoholism controlled.

